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Southeast Conference
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Feature Focus - July 2012



Southeast Conference FAQ's

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Southeast Conference Gathers in Birmingham to Contemplate “Cultivating a Culture of Call”

By Kathy Clark

Every year of the last seven years we have lived together, my sisters and I have attempted to grow a small vegetable and herb garden. That is, after all, what country folk do, and since our move to rural northeast Georgia, we have considered that we ought to do the same. So each spring, we have watched for the signs that the last frost has passed, avoiding the temptation to get outside too early to play in the dirt, and we prepare to plant those seeds and small sprouts that we just know will grow to be an abundant crop, enough at least to can or freeze a few months' worth of homegrown deliciousness, with some left over to share with our neighbors and friends. With hope we have hoed and tilled, composted and planted, watered and weeded, waited and watched. And each year, frankly, we have been lucky to pick three or four ripe tomatoes, a handful of green beans, and a misshapen cucumber or two. They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. I publicly confess, my sisters and I are insane gardeners, by definition. Hope may spring eternal, but our longed-for homegrown harvests do not.

Folks who are rooted in an agrarian culture, as many are in our Southeast Conference, have an innate understanding of the verb “to cultivate.” They understand that plants, especially crops that are needed for the nourishment of life, do

of the verb “to cultivate.” They understand that plants, especially crops that are needed for the nourishment of life, do not just blossom on their own as if by magic, but are uniquely suited to particular environments, and must be carefully prepared for, nurtured, and attended to in order to grow and produce abundantly. Others, like my sisters and me, have an awful lot to learn from these folks if we want to enjoy more than one tomato sandwich per year. Perhaps we simply need to ask and listen, notice, and then nurture.

At the 46th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference, we as a gathered community of faith took the time to contemplate what it means to cultivate a culture of call in and among our congregations. For faith to flourish, we must have leadership of all kinds, lay and authorized, serving in the church and in the world. The Revs. Elizabeth Clement and Holly MillerShank reminded us in workshops and worship that the church is fertile ground for growing leadership, but it does not happen on its own. Every member plays a role in cultivating leadership by noticing, naming, and nurturing the gifts with which God so abundantly surrounds us. It begins as simply as seeing and being seen – reaching out to one another, saying “I see you,” and responding, “I am here.” With that, and the gift of imagination, the work – and the joy – of ministry have begun. But it doesn’t stop there. Cultivating a culture of call takes as much wisdom, practice, and labor as does cultivating a crop of ruby red tomatoes. Seed and soil must be suited to one another. The community needs to come together to share collective wisdom, skills, tools, and know-how, watered by a good dose of corporate prayer, so that a bumper crop of faithful leaders can grow.

I looked up the word “cultivate” **on-line** and, in addition to references to tilling and fertilizing, this is some of what I found:

- To bestow attention, care, and labor upon, with a view to valuable returns;
- To direct special attention to; to devote time and thought to; to foster; to cherish.

I invite you to sit prayerfully with these words as you consider how yours is a calling congregation. These definitions speak eloquently to who we are as church and what it is we must do in order to grow. If we believe in and value the ministry of all the baptized, then we must bestow attention, care, and labor with a view toward that end. If we understand that the future of the church depends upon women and men who are uniquely prepared for ministry for “such a time as this,” then we must direct special attention to, devote time and thought to, foster, and cherish the potential leaders among us.

It is with humility that I confess my failings as a cultivator of crops. God grant me the wisdom and courage to attend to, cherish, and cultivate that which I value – a culture of call in our congregations. Perhaps next spring, my sisters and I ought to consider joining a community garden.

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